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ABSTRACT

Ethical concepts, when taught, should be operational and placed in context. Applying the operational criterion is tough enough in a single culture; however, in a course in intercultural communication, difficulties are multiplied. The teacher of an intercultural communication classroom should embrace the position that many ethical principles are relative, because they are the products of different cultures. A few are universal, because they are valid in all cultures. In addition, the teacher should stipulate particular definitions for morals, ethics, and culture. Two principles that are universal are that no action is ethical if it harms persons, and the action that benefits persons accumulates ethical quality. A class seeking theories and hypotheses for managing ethics cross culturally should grapple with the basic issue of whether the human animal is capable of accepting values other than its own. Thus, a final building block in the "stance" of a teacher of ethics in intercultural communication must be recognition of how limited human beings are when they try to respect persons who are fundamentally different. (HOD)

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ETHICS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

I think that my colleagues who have discussed the treatment of ethics in varied aspects of speech communication will agree with me when I say that whatever ethical concepts we teach, above all else these should be operational. Our objective is to place ethics in context. As the primary task of a law school is to produce a competent and ethical lawyer, so our job is to produce persons skilled in spoken interaction who are able to apply their ethical standards to their communication. This requires a theory of ethics they understand and believe in. As Einstein said, theory limits what one can see.

Applying the operational criterion is tough enough in a single culture. In a course in intercultural communication difficulties are multiplied. We must try to answer the questions: "What are the facts of life of ethics in other cultures?" and "How can we adapt our values to theirs, while we maintain-and protect-ours?" The nasty reality that gets in our way is the fact that every culture believes its system of morality is the best. And this inner conviction of ethnocentric superiority is more pronounced in Americans than in most other people in the world.

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The Multicultural Classroom

A vexing problem is the patriotic indigenous American student in a multi-cultural classroom. International students have experienced so many ethical norms contrary to their own that they already know about different interpretations of right and wrong. Fortunately, most Americans who elect the course (by choice) have had significant intercultural experience. By being in the Peace Corps or being exchange students they have been puzzled by cross-cultural experiences they did not understand. Hence they are open to all possible explanations, including contrasting codes of morality. But those American students who find themselves in an intercultural course because it fulfills a requirement are different. They are not only culture bound, they are culture blind. Without thinking about it they assume that the American culture is all there is, or should be. Opening those minds to other world views is the greatest challenge to the teacher of intercultural communication.

Some of you are thinking, in a course in intercultural communication, why not circumvent ethics, avoid the topic entirely? You can't! It hits you over the head. Take multinational business. In Country X you pay government officials to facilitate private deals. In Country Y there are no individual property rights. A tractor or a jeep belongs to the one who takes it. In Country Z, skillful misrepresentation is much admired. The talented liar is the role model for youth. Such contrasting notions of moral, ethical behavior cannot be ignored. That managing such differences is a vital part of intercultural communication is a central and important matter is confirmed by a Ford Foundation executive with twenty years of varied overseas experience. He says, "Most problems in

cross-cultural projects comes from different ideas of right and wrong."

A Position for the Teacher

What should be the stance of the teacher dealing with ethics in the intercultural communication classroom? First, she/he must knock in the head the belief that all ethics are universals. This is not easy, because the notion that ethical principles are the same everywhere is popular and held in high places. In preparation for a sabbatical year to study ethics of multinational business I took a seminar in philosophy of ethics at the University of Minnesota. The professor, a much respected authority, seemed horrified when I asked about ethical relativity. "A principle is not ethical," he said, "unless it is universal." I found this statement dissonant with the Ford Foundation executive's statement that different ideas of right and wrong cause most of the confusion in cross-cultural ventures.

We could dispute relative ethics ad infinitum, perhaps ad nauseum. A practical position for the teacher is to say, "many ethical principles are relative, because they are the products of different cultures. A few are universal, because they are valid in all cultures. We will encounter both types, and must be free to accept either."

Three Key Definitions

A second advice to the teacher who would make intercultural ethics operational, is to stipulate particular definitions for morals, ethics and culture:

1. Morality is what a group (culture) agrees upon--as norms of desirable behavior

2. Ethics is what an individual acts upon because, in the specific instance (in context,) it is desirable behavior.
3. A culture is a system of moral demands.

When you write those three definitions on the blackboard, be prepared for quizzical looks and vacant stares. A little eloquence and some subtle persuasion can change the nonverbals of perplexity to nods of understanding, however.

An example can illustrate the distinction between morality and ethics. Recently I was a member of a final oral examination committee. The candidate was on the threshold of a Masters Degree in Industrial Relations. The young man had worked for an executive search organization, locating specialized expertise and placing it in other organizations at higher salaries. His basic technique of finding executive talent was misrepresentation. He would call the head of a division at, for example, Control Data and say, "I'm Professor Hodgkins of the University of Minnesota. A former student of mine is working for you, but his name has slipped my mind. I need to locate him. Could you tell me who it might be?" Whereupon the Control Data boss would start naming people who worked in his unit and telling about them. The caller soon had the names of several prospects, whom he phoned with the message that if they are interested in a higher paying job, to call him in the evening.

Now, of course he was not Professor Hodgkins and what he told the Control Data boss was totally untrue. Nonetheless, he considered his behavior to be ethical. How come? Because as he claimed he never helped a person change jobs unless he was certain that the change definitely benefitted the individual. "What I did," he said, "was ethical but

immoral. Morality is what society says should be, in general; ethics tells you what is the best decision in the particular instance."

A case like this not only distinguishes ethics from morals but focuses attention upon individual adaptations people make that "adjust" the norms of a culture. It also illustrates that ethical decisions are made in the minds of individuals, and are always affected by unique circumstances. In other words, context always makes a difference.

Now, let's look at the third stipulated definition, originated by Farke Burgess in 1970, that culture is a "system of moral demands." This definition tells how culture influences behavior. A definition of what culture is comes from John and Ruth Useem and John Donoghue: "---the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings." In the community that is a culture how does the system of moral demands work?

Culture as the Source of Morality

The most intelligible and memorable explanation of how culture defines and implements moral demands is found in a metaphor used by Bob Persig, author of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. A culture, he said, should be thought of as an intricate fabric, woven by a group of people living together over hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years. The fabric is a texture of behaviors and beliefs that have enabled this particular community to survive. No two fabrics are alike, because no two cultures have evolved through identical experiences.

In any culture behavior that protects or strengthens its fabric is moral. Whatever strains, weakens or tears a culture's fabric is immoral. Consequently, the predominant concern of a person entering a culture

should be to avoid damage to its fabric. The Ugly American has become notorious as a tearer of fabric. He is immoral because he doesn't bother to learn about and adjust to the culture he enters and because he is incapable of seeing the devastation wreaked by his American behaviors.

Beulah Rohrlick improved the Persig analogy by extending it to embrace an individual's deviations from her/his cultural norms. The fabric, she said, is like a Navajo rug. One face is pure Navajo, representing the culture's predominant moral demands. The reverse side, an individual's adaptations, is still definitely Navajo, but differs in many details from the normative side. The normative Navajo demands are the morality of the culture, the individual modifications are the operational ethical guides to personal decisions. The MA candidate in Industrial Relations was adjusting but not rejecting the normative morality of his culture. The principle he followed, benefit to the person affected, he termed, quite properly, an ethic.

OK, our class now understands the difference between morals and ethics, it appreciates that both morals and ethics are culture-specific, and it sees that we don't want to tear up another culture when we visit any more than we want others to come here and rip up our fabric. The question that attacks the foundation of this entirely reasonable stance is this: "What am I expected to do, abandon ethics and morals of my culture when I visit another?"

Entering Another Culture

The answer is, of course not. The sojourner's role is to know about the culture entered so as not to be surprised--perhaps shocked--by different standards. Two principles guide the visitor. Always show respect for

values, morals and normative practices of the other culture. And--refrain from evaluation. The last is difficult. When an American discusses differences with a representative of another culture, verbally or non-verbally the American usually reveals that he considers the non-American elements inferior. Americans rush to judgment. We label practices that are strange to us "bad" or "good." The Chinese find strange customs "different" and "interesting."

Usually differences that require adjusting to are not sufficiently repugnant to the visitor to demand excessive amounts of self-discipline. The dog lover visiting China can respect the Chinese view that dog is a culinary delicacy and refrain from criticism. However, some gaps in approved practices are so wide that bridging them is difficult. A friend was a U.S. military advisor to the Vietnamese army in the highlands of Vietnam before we became involved in the fighting. His problem came from an accepted practice in the Vietnamese culture that completely violated a moral principle central to his culture. Each night the Vietnamese disposed of enemies captured during the day by torturing them to death. Colonel Dyer said, "I knew I couldn't change this time-honored custom. So I pitched my tent on the opposite side of the compound so I wouldn't hear the screams."

Let you assume that gaps this wide no longer exist, consider the situation confronted currently by U.S. military advisors in El Salvador.

But you as a teacher of intercultural communication are not advocating that your students tolerate torture and murder because these are accepted, even honored, practices in other cultures. You are

advocating that they know about such customs before they accept an assignment which requires tolerating the intolerable. They they can make an informed decision to do it, or refuse to go.

To come back to the more usual adjustments required for interacting with members of another culture, a requirement for crossing cultural boundaries is flexibility. The necessary flexibility is ethical, not moral. By placing his/her ethics in context, the intercultural interactor becomes operational. A personal detachment comes when a sojourner accepts the fact that she/he will never be a member of the other culture but can become empathic with it and be interested in, even enjoy most differences. Morality of the communicator can remain untouched.

An Ethical Universal

Near the beginning of this paper we noted that there are some universals in ethics. The Industrial Relations MA illustrated two, the application of the principles ^{first} that no action is ethical if it harms persons affected, and ^{second} the action that benefits affected persons accumulates ethical quality. These guidelines can be extended to a major principle that can yield ethical judgments universally, in all cultures, at all times and places, the Principle of Social Utility.

Remembering that all ethical decisions are made in the mind of an individual confronting alternative possibilities, we will illustrate the social utility principle in action. Somewhere in the world a community leader is contemplating offering an associate an assignment that will take her from her husband and children for weeks at a time, totaling approximately six months each year. The salary in the new position is double this person's present salary, and the duties of the

of the assignment match the abilities and interests of the prospect. Her husband is employed at a level considerably below the position she would have. Further, the husband is unstable, and has undergone psychotherapy recently. Her children are six and nine years old, obviously dependent upon their mother.

To estimate the ethical quality of a decision to offer the assignment to this woman the community leader might apply the social utility principle. Two questions would need to be answered: Will the people affected by this decision benefit? Will any individual be harmed? If the first question can be answered "yes" and the second "no", then the decision maker can claim that his proposed job offer has social utility and is ethically justifiable. Nobody said it was easy to answer questions like this in the real world. But unless these questions are answered to the best of the decision-maker's ability, that person has not made a sincere effort to be ethical. To repeat, the unique advantage of the Social Utility Principle as a guide to ethical behavior is universality. The two key questions can be answered meaningfully in any culture, any where, at any time.

The Operational Conundrum

A class seeking theories and hypotheses for managing ethics cross-culturally should grapple with the basic issue: Is the human animal capable of accepting values other than its own? We tell students glibly to be open-minded, to tolerate and respect moral standards that contradict theirs. When two persons from contrasting cultures meet in the intercultural communication class and try to follow this advice it seems to work, for a while. But after the honeymoon period, when Person A finds that Person B really is committed to and lives by a behavior repugnant to

Person A, typically their friendship cools. This is useful to the intercultural class, for it demonstrates the difficulty of developing personal relationships across cultures better than any reading assignment.

So a final building block in the "stance" of a teacher of ethics in intercultural communication must be recognition of how limited human beings are when they try to respect persons who are different, fundamentally.